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Andre Bazin
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André Bazin

Bazin on Post-Neorealistic Rossellini, De Sica, and Visconti: Three Original Reviews

Preface: André Bazin (by Bert Cardullo)

ANDRÉ BAZIN IS CREDITED WITH almost single-handedly establishing the study of film as an accepted intellectual pursuit, as well as with being the spiritual father of the French New Wave. In 1951 Bazin co-founded and became editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du cinéma,* the single most influential critical periodical in the history of the cinema. Among the film critics who came under his tutelage there were four who would go on to become the most renowned directors of the postwar French cinema: François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol. Bazin can also be considered the principal instigator of the equally influential *auteur* theory: the idea that, since film is an art form, the director of a movie must be perceived as the chief creator of its unique cinematic style.

Unlike nearly all the other authors of major film theories—and Bazin was the realist among them—he was a working or practical critic who wrote regularly about individual films. Bazin based his criticism on the film actually made rather than on any preconceived aesthetic or sociological principles; and for the first time with him, film theory therefore became a matter

(All notes have been provided by the translator/editor.)

This review was written in 1953 but only published for the first time in French in Vol. 4 ("Une Esthétique de la réalité: le néo-réalisme") of Bazin's four-volume *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958-1962), pp. 97-99. This English translation is published here, for the first time, with the permission of Madame Janine Bazin.

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not of pronouncement or prescription, but of description, analysis, and deduction. Indeed, Bazin can be regarded as the aesthetic link between film critics and film theorists. During his relatively short writing career, his primary concern was not to answer questions but to raise them, not to establish cinema as an art but to ask, "What is art?" and "What is cinema?"

Regrettably, André Bazin died tragically young (he was only forty) of leukemia in 1958, an illness against which he fought bravely for years. Yet he left much material behind—in his four-volume collection *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (1958-62) as well as scattered in a variety of magazines—some of the best of which I gathered in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties* (Routledge, 1997), to which my *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* (in preparation) may be considered a complement.

André Bazin and Italian Neorealism will contain, for the first time in English, all of Bazin's writing about this seminal cinematic movement—all of it written at the time of these films' first release (including the three pieces translated here), which makes Bazin the first comprehensive chronicler-critic of neorealism. This volume will address such prominent directors as Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, and Federico Fellini; well-known movies like *Bicycle Thieves, Germany, Year Zero, La Strada,* and *La Terra Trema*; and important subjects like art and politics, realism versus reality, and neorealism's eclipse amid postwar Italy's economic prosperity. *André Bazin and Italian Neorealism* will be aimed, as Bazin would want, not only at scholars, teachers, and critics of film but also at educated filmgoers and students of the cinema at all levels.

Europe '51

The year 1952 began with a misunderstood masterpiece (De Sica's *Umberto D.*), and it ended with an accursed masterpiece, Roberto Rossellini's *Europe '51* (a.k.a. *The Greatest Love*). Just as the critics had reproached De Sica for making a social melodrama, they accused Rossellini of indulging in a confused, indeed reactionary, political ideology. They were once again wrong for the most part, for they were passing judgment on the subject without taking into consideration the style that gives it its meaning and its aesthetic value.

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A young, rich, and frivolous woman loses her only son, who commits suicide one evening when his mother is so preoccupied with her social life that she sends the boy to bed rather than be forced to pay attention to him. The poor woman's moral shock is so violent that it plunges her into a crisis of conscience which she initially tries to resolve by dedicating herself to humanitarian causes, on the advice of a cousin of hers who is a Communist intellectual. But little by little she gets the feeling that this is only an immediate stage beyond which she must pass if she is to achieve a mystical charity all her own, one that transcends the boundaries of politics and even of social or religious morality. Accordingly, she looks after a sick prostitute until the latter dies, then aids in the escape of a young criminal from the police. This last initiative causes a small scandal, and, with the complicity of an entire family alarmed by her behavior, the woman's husband, who understands her less and less, decides to have her committed to a sanitarium. If she had become a member of the Communist Party or had entered a convent, bourgeois society would have had fewer objections to her actions, since Europe in the early 1950s is a world of political parties and social organizations.

From the perspective of its action, it is true that Rossellini's script is not devoid of naïveté, even of incoherence or at any rate pretentiousness. One sees the particulars that the author has borrowed from Simone Weil's life, without in fact being able to recapture the strength of her thinking. But such reservations don't hold up before the whole of a film that one must understand and judge on the basis of its *mise en scène*. What would Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* be worth if it were to be reduced to a summary of its plot? Because Rossellini is a true director, the essence of his film does not consist in the elaboration of its script: that essence is supplied by its very style.

The author of *Germany, Year Zero* (1947, in which a boy also kills himself) is profoundly haunted in a personal way by the horror of the death of children, even more by the horror of their suicide, and it is around his heroine's authentic spiritual experience of such a suicide that the film is organized. The eminently modern theme of lay sainthood then naturally emerged, but its more or less skillful development in the script matters very little. What matters is that each sequence is a kind of meditation or filmic song on this fundamental theme as revealed by the *mise*

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en scène, whose aim is not to demonstrate but to show. Moreover, how could we resist the moving spiritual presence of Ingrid Bergman, and, beyond the actress, how could we remain insensitive to the intensity of a *mise en scène* in which the universe seems to be organized along spiritual lines of force, to the point that it sets them off as manifestly as iron filings in a magnetic field? Seldom has the presence of the spiritual in human beings and in the world been expressed with such dazzling clarity.

Granted, Rossellini's neorealism here seems very different from, even contradictory to, De Sica's. However, I think it wise to reconcile them as two poles of the same aesthetic school. Whereas De Sica investigates reality with ever more expansive curiosity, Rossellini by contrast seems to strip it down further each time, to stylize it with a painful but nonetheless unrelenting rigor—in short, to return to a classicism of dramatic expression in acting as well as in *mise en scène.* But, on closer examination, this classicism stems from a common neorealistic revolution. For Rossellini, as for De Sica, the aim is to reject the categories of acting and of dramatic expression in order to force reality to reveal its significance solely through appearances. Rossellini does not make his actors *act,* he doesn't make them express this or that feeling; he compels them only to *be* a certain way before the camera. In such a *mise en scène,* the respective places of the characters, their ways of walking, their movements on the set, and their gestures have much more importance than the feelings they show on their faces, or even than the words they say. Besides, what "feelings" could Ingrid Bergman "express"? Her drama lies far beyond any psychological nomenclature. Her face only outlines a certain property of suffering.

Europe '51 gives ample indication that such a *mise en scène* calls for the most sophisticated stylization possible. A film like this is the opposite of a realistic one "drawn from life": it is the equivalent of austere and terse writing, which is so stripped of ornament that it sometimes verges on the ascetic. At this point, neorealism returns full circle to classical abstraction and its generalizing quality. Hence this apparent paradox: the best version of *Europe '51* is not the dubbed Italian version, but the English one, which employs the greatest possible number of original voices. At the far reaches of this realism, the accuracy of exterior social reality becomes unimportant. The children in the streets

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of Rome can speak English without our even realizing the implausibility of such an occurrence. This is reality through style, and thus a reworking of the conventions of art.

Gold of Naples

As strange as it might seem on first consideration, Vittorio De Sica is an accursed filmmaker. I may sound paradoxical, or I may seem to be looking for an argument, because my statement increases in ambiguity when you simultaneously consider the popularity of De Sica the actor and the critical importance assigned to *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). However, all we have to do is reflect a little to realize that *Miracle in Milan* (1951) has enjoyed critical but not popular success and that *Umberto D.* (1952) hasn't enjoyed any success at all. The conditions under which the latter film was released in Paris, moreover, amounted to a guarantee of failure.

The festival prize lists are also quite significant in this regard. The year *Umberto D.* was shown in Cannes (at a matinee screening), the jury preferred to honor *Cops and Robbers* (1951; dir. Mario Monicelli). In 1953, the jury underlined the Hollywood-style immorality of De Sica's *Stazione Termini* (*Terminal Station,* a.k.a. *Indiscretion of an American Wife,* 1953) by deciding to ignore it; this year again, the audience and the jury have coldly received *Gold of Naples* (1954), and De Sica wasn't even awarded a tiny tin palm. In the end the film is going to be released in Paris only at the cost of cutting two of its six original episodes, including the best one, or at least the most significant. In the meantime, however, De Sica's popularity as an actor continues to grow thanks to films like *Bread, Love, and Jealousy* (1954; dir. Luigi Comencini).[1]

It is fashionable among young critics to drag De Sica's name through the mud, and I grant that he occasionally deserves some serious condemnation. But before condemning him, one should at least try to understand why the festival juries, half the traditional critics, and the public in general ignore or despise not so much his most ambitious films, like *Umberto D.,* as his compromised projects such as *Stazione Termini* and *Gold of Naples.* For it is indeed quite strange that, even when De Sica resigns himself, for reasons far too obvious, to making a film with stars and vignettes and built around clever tricks and purple passages,

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everything turns out as though he had again been too ambitious for a festival audience. The criticisms I have heard people make of his work at Cannes are not at all justified. Granted, *Gold of Naples* is a prostituted film, but it is still so classy that it seems prudish and boring to those who admire our own *Adorable Creatures* (1952; dir. Christian-Jaque) or bourgeois psychological dramas tailor-made by good French craftsmen.

Everything, then, depends on your point of reference. Absolutely speaking, or compared with his own work and with what we like of other Italian films, De Sica has not hesitated in *Gold of Naples* to make deplorable concessions. But compared with what the public and often even the critics know—or don't know—of Italian cinema, his film remains a monument to austerity. One must nonetheless reproach De Sica first for betraying neorealism here by pretending to serve it. In fact, *Gold of Naples* is an essentially theatrical film, through the twists of its plot as well as through the decisive importance it accords to acting. Certainly, the movie's episodes can be considered "short stories" or "novelettes," but their skillful and rigorous construction deprives them of the dramatic indeterminacy that constitutes neorealism. The incidents and the characters proceed from the action in *Gold of Naples*, they don't precede it. De Sica has succeeded only in regenerating the structure of conventional drama or the dramatic novel through certain elements borrowed from neorealism. By multiplying the picturesque and unexpected touches, he wraps his dramatic construction in a coral-like cover of small facts that deceive us as to the make-up of the rock underneath. Neorealism being in essence a denial of dramatic categories, De Sica substitutes for them a micro-dramaturgy that suggests the absence of action. In the process, however, he evidences only a superior theatrical cunning.

This is why the episode I prefer is perhaps the one that people generally deem the most offensive: I mean the card game, because it is also the sketch whose scenic resources are the least camouflaged. This story of a monomaniacal baron[2] whom the baroness forbids to gamble yet who ends up gambling away his jacket and glasses with the concierge's son, is a farce conceived for acting effects. There are limits to the ambition of this genre but these limits are acceptable, especially when you consider that what De Sica adds to the genre considerably increases its aes-

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thetic value. It is always better to give more than you had promised rather than to fail to live up to the promises you have made.

Conversely, I much admire—without liking it very much—the sketch that the filmmakers undoubtedly prefer: I refer to the burial of a child (unfortunately cut by the French distributor). De Sica and Zavattini wanted to give a guarantee of neorealism here; unlike the other episodes, which are artfully constructed, this one appears to be a reconstituted scene from a news bulletin. De Sica limits himself to following the funeral procession of the dead youngster. The mother's behavior, the wretched exhibition she puts on all along the way in order to give her child's last voyage a solemnity that is both tragic and joyous—this never crystallizes into "action," yet manages to hold our interest from beginning to end. Such an astonishing bravura passage in principle belongs to the same aesthetic family as the maid's wake-up scene in *Umberto D.* Why do I feel embarrassed by it, then? Probably because of the moral contradiction between the subject matter and the almost unseemly cleverness-by-understatement with which the sequence is handled. Such control over means and ends, when the situation of the characters calls for our sympathy and even pity, is somewhat irritating. Think by comparison of the simple, efficient, and sincere lyricism of the director Jules Dassin in *Rififi* (1955) during the return of the Stéphanois[3] with their child.

As you can see, my reservations are not small. They won't prevent me, however, from acknowledging the merits of *Gold of Naples* from a relative point of view. If the film was not successful at Cannes, that must be because it nonetheless contains something good and worthy. We must explain the paradox of its failure not by its shortcomings, which I have just mentioned and which on the contrary should have contributed to its success, but by the upholding at its very core of a union of form and content that justifies a certain admiration.

First and foremost, craft is craft, and one had better realize this before criticizing its use. I apologize to our Hitchcockians, whom I am going to shock, but it is the master of suspense whom I can't help thinking of here. Of course, De Sica's skill does not bring itself to bear on the same elements of the *mise en scène* as Hitchcock's. The structuring of the image plays only a secondary role (although there is an unforgettable visual find in *Gold*

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of Naples: the elevator in the baron's house). The *mise en scène* is practically identified here with the directing of the actors, but you have to consider that the result is the same in that nothing in the picture seems likely to escape from the filmmaker's control. Although there are fifty kids scattered like a flight of birds in the frame, in one scene each of them seems to be making at every instance exactly the gesture that needs to be made—paradoxically, even when that gesture must be unexpected. It *is* in fact unexpected, and that is the amazing part. De Sica relies on a certain margin of freedom and spontaneity that his walk-ons give him, but this man and his power are such that not a single discordant or approximate note is struck in the crowd. Both God and the Devil submit to that power. Moreover, this director's self-assurance verges on obscenity during the scene of the baron's card game. Before De Sica, filmmakers had managed to make children play-act, but even the most gifted child is capable, after all, of only two or three expressions, which the director then strives to justify. For the first time, one can see here a ten- or eleven-year-old youngster express in ten minutes a gamut of feelings whose variety equals that of his grown-up partner, in this case De Sica himself.

As for professional actors, it would be an understatement to say that De Sica brings out the best in them: he reconstitutes them entirely. Not through the facile device of giving the professional a role that is different from the part he usually plays, but by somehow revealing in him another actor, a richer one who is more imbued with the character he is playing. Take, for instance, the extraordinary acting of Silvana Mangano, but take also the acting of Totò in the story of the racketeer. When you consider that it has become a commonplace of French criticism to maintain that our own Fernandel is a dramatic actor who too seldom finds work as one, all you can do is burst out laughing. Fernandel at his best looks like nothing more than an industrious clown alongside the simplicity and intelligence evidenced here by his Italian rival. God knows, however, that their usual antics are pretty much alike. But everything happens in this film as though De Sica had the power of endowing his nonprofessional actors with the skill of experienced performers and his established stars with the spontaneity of common people. Of course, I'm not saying that this is my personal ideal, but it is,

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at least implicitly, the one which almost all filmmakers would strive to attain if it were in their power to get close to such an ideal. De Sica achieves it so perfectly that the audience, which is used to approximations of the ideal, perhaps feels more ill at ease than pleased in the face of it.

I don't think, either, that in general the qualities of the script have been properly appreciated. Whatever one may think of the choice of subjects, it goes without saying that each of these could have been treated in a different way. Yet, the construction of all the episodes, and particularly of their dénouements, is amazingly intelligent. As a general rule, each story calls for an ending in, say, the style of Marcel Pagnol—*i.e.*, a falsely moving one. Naturally, the average French filmmaker would substitute for such an ending one in Charles Spaak's[4] style, i.e., a true-to-life and pessimistic conclusion. The ambitious filmmaker would reject both the "good" and "bad" endings and, in an act of supreme daring, would not end the story at all. De Sica and Zavattini manage to go them all one better.

The story seems at first to be moving toward a happy ending. But we expect a surprise, and it comes with an unexpected development in the action, which makes us believe that in fact there will be no ending. Then, in the last few seconds, the script uncovers the most unexpected yet most necessary ending, which is the dialectical synthesis of all endings that it had rejected. This is not due to the cleverness of an inventive screenwriter who seeks to surprise us at all costs, but rather to a constructive determination that throws a far more illuminating light on the whole action. The device presupposes such a dramatic strictness that it sometimes goes unnoticed even by the most attentive viewers, who cannot even imagine that the filmmaker might have aimed so high.

The ending of the episode entitled "Theresa," for example, was incorrectly interpreted by almost everyone. This is the nearly Dostoyevskian story of a young and rich Neapolitan bourgeois who decides to marry a prostitute to punish himself for having let a young woman die of love for him. This marriage, which must necessarily—and according to his own wishes—destroy his happiness, endanger his wealth, and ruin his reputation, takes place without the poor girl's understanding the game that she is being made to play. (This is almost the plot of *The*

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Ladies of the Bois de Boulogne[5] in reverse.) When she discovers that she is present only to remind her husband of his sin, her despair is immense. In his masochistic madness, the man hadn't even considered any of the most humanly plausible propositions: first, that his prostitute could make a nice and sweet wife, if only out of gratitude to him; or, second, that she could summon up enough female dignity to reject such a hateful game. Projecting onto the whole world his desire for castigation, he can see the woman he has chosen as true only to the *a priori* moral ideal of the prostitute—that is, as a diabolical and wicked human being.

This summary clearly indicates the two possible endings: (1) the man, longing for unhappiness, finds happiness in spite of himself with a good girl (the Pagnol ending); (2) the prostitute, her female pride injured, prefers going back to the street in spite of her dreams of bourgeois respectability, comfort, and fidelity (the Spaak ending). Well, after her awful wedding night, the girl does run away; then, in the street, she thinks the situation over and goes back. I have heard people account for this third ending with psychological explanations that vary more or less according to the following: after she has run away out of wounded pride, the poor woman finds herself alone on the street in the rain and realizes all that she is going to lose; resigned, she silences her dignity and returns to bourgeois society, which is the ideal of every "self-respecting" prostitute. This explanation, however, suggests that the viewer has not carefully watched the last two shots. In them Silvana Mangano's face, carefully lit by a street lamp, expresses a whole range of feelings, the final one of which is neither resignation nor envy but rather hatred, which is moreover confirmed by the way she knocks on the door to ask her husband for admittance. The only plausible explanation, then, is that she had left on account of the blow to her pride, and that she comes back for the same reason, after some deep reflection. She has understood that flight is a doubly absurd solution, since it will derive her of the material advantages of marriage as well as the consolations of revenge. Her return is therefore neither resigned nor submissive; it is an even higher manifestation of her femininity than flight, for it proves she thought that even a prostitute had the right to be loved. And now she's going to prove something even greater: that she is capable of avenging herself.

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Thus matters finally get settled according to the man's will, but for moral reasons that are exactly the opposite of those he imagines. The girl is going to take her expected place in the unbelievable scheme of things; toward her husband she's now going to behave according to the conventional idea of a prostitute, because she will have ceased to be one passively. She will thus affirm her womanhood through hatred. Fulfilling the man's wish, she will then bring him to his doom, not because prostitutes will be prostitutes but out of deliberate choice, as a free woman of the world. You will recognize that this ending is not only unexpected and brilliant (provided that you at least *see it*), but also and above all that it retroactively raises the action from the primitive level of psycho-sociology to the higher plane of morality and even metaphysics.

Gold of Naples seems to me to contain still other important lessons. To the extent that the filmmaker's intention is perhaps more or less deliberately impure, some aspects of the Zavattini-De Sica collaboration come out more clearly. I will first underline the fact that *Gold of Naples* is a film of cruelty—a cruelty that has undoubtedly contributed to disconcerting the festival audience, which is used to associating good humor with southern European verve. Naples in this sense is nothing but a super-Marseilles. I myself have made rather naïve statements in the past about De Sica's kindheartedness. And it's true that sentimentalism drips profusely from his films. But much will be forgiven him here for the authenticity of his cruelty. Granted, goodness in art can quickly become revolting. Chaplin's tramp may indeed look so revoltingly good to those who don't discern the ambiguity in his heart. Goodness in itself does not signify anything, but its close and almost inevitable association with cruelty has a moral and aesthetic meaning that psychology alone cannot account for. Am I wrong? It seems to me that such kind cruelty, or cruel kindness, is far more than simply the invention of De Sica and Zavattini.

In any case, what seems very clear to me is that the director's talent essentially proceeds from his talent as an actor, and that this talent is not neorealistic by nature. If the collaboration between Zavattini and De Sica has been so successful, this is perhaps due to the attraction of opposites. In this marriage, the writer has brought the realistic temperament and the director the knowledge of theatrical exploitation. But these two artists

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were too intelligent or too gifted just to add the latter to the former: they subtly combined the two or, if I may be permitted such an image, they emulsified them. Theatricality and realism are so subtly mixed in their work that their aesthetic suspension gives the illusion of a new body, which would then be *neo*realism. But its stability is uncertain, and we can very well see in *Gold of Naples* how a great deal of the theatricality precipitates to the bottom—or is it the foundation?—of the *mise en scène.*

Senso

The action of *Senso* (1954) takes place in 1866 at the time of the "Risorgimento." Venice is under Austrian occupation. The performance of a Verdi opera (*Il Trovatore*) at the Théâtre de la Fenice is the occasion for a patriotic demonstration during which Marquis Ussoni, one of the leaders of the "Resistance," provokes a young Austrian officer, Franz Mahler, only to be arrested upon his exit from the theater. To save Ussoni, his cousin, Countess Livia Serpieri, seeks to make the acquaintance of the handsome Austrian lieutenant, who easily takes advantage of the situation to try out on the imprudent countess his abilities as a skillful and cynical seducer. The result is that he becomes her lover. Such a limited summary hardly permits me to analyze the at once subtle and elemental dealings that unite for the worst this weak yet lucid young man with this beautiful older woman, who will sacrifice all honor and decency for him—ultimately

[1]In *Bread, Love, and Jealousy,* De Sica plays the police sergeant of a mountain village whose engagement to the local midwife is endangered by gossiping neighbors. This film was the sequel to the comedy *Bread, Love, and Dreams* (1953), also directed by Comencini and starring De Sica.

[2]The baron is played by Vittorio De Sica himself, as Bazin will later note.

[3]An inhabitant of the French city of Saint-Etienne.

[4]A Belgian screenwriter whose credits include *Carnival in Flanders* (1935), *La Grande Illusion* (1937), *Justice Is Done* (1950), and *Adorable Creatures* (1952).

[5]*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne,* 1946 (direction and scenario by Robert Bresson, after an extract from Diderot's *Jacque le Fataliste*; dialogue by Jean Cocteau).

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betraying the cause of her friends in the "Resistance," whom she had served as an advisor.

According to impeccable logic, Visconti develops the action on two levels: the historical and the individual. The love relationship of the two protagonists begins and evolves in an irreversibly downward direction, whereas all the values (moral as well as political) that attach to the historical context are progressive and bracing. But this moral-political Manichaeism is not the product of a clever screenwriter's or director's trick: it is inherent in the story from the start, and subsequent events simply conspire to bring it out. To be sure, there are villains (Count Serpieri, for example, who is the typical "collaborator"), but the protagonists are doomed despite them, and Franz Mahler, in his refined and clear-eyed ignominy, knows it. Marquis Ussoni, however, is there as proof of the fact that history does not dispose of anyone *a priori*. On the contrary: he digs deep into his family's heritage to find the courage and determination with which to go on. And if she hadn't been blinded by love, Livia herself would perhaps have continued to participate in the triumph of History. But as soon as she is blindfolded, she can but fight in vain against the current as she is dragged down with her social class to the bottom of the abyss, where she will have only the fatal consolation of joining her lover.

What should be transparent even from my poor summary of the action are both the film's transposition of time from the "Risorgimento" to the Occupation and Resistance of World War II (this transposition is carried very far in its details, especially where the relations between the underground "Resistance" and the official national army are concerned), and its Marxist analysis of a romantic entanglement. From these two points of view, *Senso* would certainly deserve a fuller discussion than I am able to give it here. But I must at least point out that the appeal of this ideological perspective is in its never appearing to have been slavishly applied from outside the aesthetic logic of the narrative; just the opposite: the ideological component comes across as an added dimension that naturally attends the revelation of the romantic truth. Nevertheless, I don't think that *Senso* breaks any absolutely new ground. In this respect, the film is probably simply adhering to the novelistic aesthetic that originated with Flaubert and that was particularly affirmed by naturalism. *Senso* thus allies itself with a literature

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that is simultaneously descriptive and critical. Still, and for completely contingent reasons, good examples of Marxist inspiration are so rare that it would be difficult to remain insensitive to this one.

But let's try to define the style adopted by Visconti in this film. I don't think that, stylistically, *Senso* is essentially different from *Ossessione* (1942) or *La Terra Trema* (1948), as some of Visconti's own comments might suggest. I recognize, on the contrary, the same fundamental preoccupations in this latest work. Of *La Terra Trema,* for instance, I would not hesitate to say that Visconti had indulged in the "theatricalization" of doubly realistic material: realistic in the normal sense, since the film was about a real village and the authentic life of its genuine inhabitants, but also realistic in the restrictive, "miserabilistic" sense. There's nothing less "beautiful," less noble, less spectacular than this poor society of fishermen. Naturally, I don't intend the term "theatrical" in its pejorative sense. I use it instead to suggest the nobility and extraordinary dignity that Visconti's *mise en scène* injected into this reality. These fishermen were not dressed in rags, they were draped in them like tragic princes. Not because Visconti was trying to distort or merely interpret their existence, but because he was revealing its immanent dignity.

Of *Senso* I would conversely say that it reveals the realism of theater. Not only because Visconti gives us this motif from the start with the opera, whose action, as it were, leaves the stage for the house, but also because the historical aspect, despite all its ramifications—especially in matters aristocratic and military —is experienced first on the level of décor and spectacle. This is true for all "period films," of course, especially those in color. But starting from this point, Visconti continuously seeks to impose upon this magnificent, beautifully composed, almost picturesque setting the rigor and, most importantly, the unobtrusiveness of a documentary.

Let me give only one example among a hundred. A few moments before battle, the Italian soldiers, who had been hiding behind haystacks, come out and fall in for the attack. A folded-up flag is brought to the commanding officer; brand-new in its protective covering, it must be taken out before it can be unfurled. This detail is barely visible in an extreme long shot in which every element is given the same, strict weight. Now imagine a similar scene shot by Duvivier or Christian-Jaque: the flag

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would be used as a dramatic symbol or as an integral part of the *mise en scène*. For Visconti, what matters is that the flag is *new* (as new as the Italian army); he calls attention to it, however, not through the framing but only, where possible, through heightened realism.

Visconti claims that in *Senso* he wanted to show the "melodrama" (read: the opera) of life. If this was his intention, his film is a complete success. *La Terra Trema*'s realism had the magnitude and the nobility of opera; the operatic in *Senso* has the density and the weight of reality. It is possible that Visconti's film satisfies another kind of dialectic. But this wouldn't amount to much if it did not first satisfy the one described here.

Trans. from the French
by Bert Cardullo

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